

# *IBT's Second International Conference* Weathering the Storm

The shifting politics and organizational allegiances of individuals is one of the perennial features of life on the left. The significance of such movements can only be assessed in the context of the overall situation of the workers' movement and the opportunities of the day. In the last eighteen months, the International Bolshevik Tendency (IBT) witnessed the departure of two small internal oppositions with clearly rightward trajectories. Four comrades rejected the transitional program, and one comrade decided that voting for workers' parties within popular fronts could be a legitimate tactic. In this same period, other leftward-moving individuals—including one from the International Socialists (IS) in Canada and two former members of the Revolutionary Workers League (RWL) in the United States—joined the IBT.

The IBT's Second International Conference, in January 1998, allowed comrades to discuss the international political situation, evaluate our work over the past period and air political differences that had arisen since our 1994 conference. The "Tasks and Perspectives" resolution adopted by the conference began with the following observation:

"The collapse of the USSR, a world-historic victory for imperialism, has cast a long shadow over this decade. While the capitalists' triumphalist propaganda about 'the death of communism' is destined to take its place beside the equally stupid declaration that 1989 marked the 'end of history,' the fall of Soviet Stalinism profoundly affected the consciousness of hundreds of millions of workers and oppressed people around the world."

The triumph of counterrevolution in the USSR produced a dramatic deterioration in living standards, life expectancy and economic security for working people throughout the former Soviet bloc, and sparked a series of bitter nationalist conflicts in the region. It also led to a wholesale assault on social programs and working-class living standards in the imperialist countries.

The rightward shift in the international political spectrum is evident within the left and workers' movement. With a few highly significant exceptions, the unions in the imperialist countries have generally been quiescent and, in some places, their influence and membership have declined considerably. In many countries the trade-union bureaucrats have been unable or unwilling to mount any serious resistance, even of a defensive character, to protect gains won in the past.

The conference document noted that, in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse, "the ostensibly revolutionary left is as fragmented, disoriented and demoralized as at any time since the defeat of the Paris Commune." To a considerable extent, the capitalists' present advantageous position derives from the popular view that the collapse of Stalinism refutes the idea that working people will ever be able to create a socialist society. The capitalists have been emboldened and, in many cases, appear to have forgotten that the concessions they are now so eager to revoke were originally granted to avert massive revolutionary social upheavals.

The increasingly aggressive corporate attacks on working people are setting the stage for large-scale eruptions of

class struggle internationally in the next period. These social explosions will propel tens of millions onto the path of revolutionary struggle. Initially, such outbreaks will inevitably have a politically primitive and semi-spontaneous character. In the absence of a visible and authoritative revolutionary alternative, much of this spontaneous anger and energy is likely to be squandered in the dead-end of petty-bourgeois radicalism (e.g., anarchism, life-stylism, environmentalism, syndicalism, etc.).

Time spent reinventing the wheel is time wasted. The crucial task for Marxists in this period is to carry forward the programmatic acquisitions of the past which alone provide the basis for recreating a revolutionary, internationalist leadership for the working class. But what steps toward rebuilding such a leadership are open to a small group of revolutionaries today? In our "Tasks and Perspectives" resolution we noted that since our inception our primary objective has been, "to ensure the survival of an anti-revisionist ideological pole within the international Trotskyist 'far left.'" The struggle to preserve the thread of revolutionary continuity carried forward by Trotsky's Fourth International after the Stalinization of the Comintern remains a vital precondition for the selection and training of the revolutionary cadres of tomorrow.

Maintaining this perspective is not always easy. Our small organization has not been immune to the pressures created by the setbacks suffered by the international working class in recent years. When the class is in retreat, few workers are actively seeking a revolutionary alternative. Not all comrades have the fortitude or vision to uphold positions that they may intellectually accept to be historically necessary, if at the moment, these views are not met with an enthusiastic response.

The impulse to attempt to escape political isolation and gain influence within broader social layers is powerful but, in a period when opportunities are few, such appetites frequently lead to jettisoning elements of the revolutionary program. But an authentically revolutionary leadership for the working class can only be reforged with cadres who are willing to tell the truth to the masses, no matter how unpopular it may be, and who are capable of sustaining themselves by taking a long view of history.

## Debate Over the Transitional Program

We had long planned to publish an edition of Trotsky's 1938 *Transitional Program*, tracing its development from the early Communist International and highlighting its role in the exemplary trade-union interventions carried out by the then-revolutionary Spartacist tendency in the 1970s. This was an ambitious project for a group of our size, but we considered it to be a critical part of our struggle to illuminate the programmatic connection between the revolutionary Comintern, Trotsky's Left Opposition and the Spartacist League of the 1960s and 70s.

In discussions prior to our conference, it became clear that some comrades had developed serious differences over fundamental elements of our political program and historical tradition. Comrade Jim Cullen, who made very



Anti-EU protestor

significant contributions to the IBT during his ten years of membership, both as our leading member in New York, and as a member of the editorial board of this journal, announced that he had come to view the essential programmatic conceptions of the *Transitional Program* as no longer applicable. He framed the issue as follows:

“The fundamental question about the TP today is this: Did the post-war world represent a continuation of the same epoch as Trotsky describes in the TP, in which case the perspectives it contains remain fundamentally our own? Or did it, on the contrary, represent a different epoch, in which case a re-evaluation of perspectives is called for?”

The majority of the IBT maintained that Lenin and Trotsky had been correct to see the outbreak of World War I as signaling a qualitative transformation in the history of capitalism as a world system: its progressive historical mission was exhausted and a new, imperialist, epoch of “wars and revolutions” had begun. In this epoch of imperialism, socialist revolution is on the historical agenda and the task of revolutionaries is to intervene in the day-to-day struggles of the working class with a program linking the immediate issues faced by working people to the necessity of overturning the existing social order. Such a program must be composed of demands capable of organizing the working class for revolutionary struggle.

Comrade Cullen and his co-thinkers argued that, since World War II, we have been living in a new epoch in which socialist revolution has not been on the historical agenda (at least in the metropolitan countries). Consequently, in their view, the *Transitional Program* is a document of merely historical interest. Cullen’s leading supporter soon came to the conclusion that not only Trotsky’s program, but also Lenin’s organizational model, should be junked. He decided that it

was therefore pointless to wait for the IBT conference, and, instead, went off to sign up as a social democrat. Cullen and his two remaining supporters waited until the conference, and then walked out at the beginning of what had been scheduled as an entire day of discussion on the issue of the transitional program.

## Maastricht & Marxism

A secondary issue in the debate, which Cullen and his collaborators correctly identified as a particular instance of their more general political differences, was the question of our attitude toward the European Union. This difference came to light when comrade Cullen criticized the position advocated by IBT co-thinkers (and others) within Arthur Scargill’s Socialist Labour Party in Britain. The premier issue of the *Marxist Bulletin* (April 1997) declared:

“We reject the Maastricht plan for an imperialist superstate as well as the Eurosceptics’ alternative, which points to an autarkic, protectionist Britain. We must prepare for aggressive resistance to all capitalist attacks on wages, living standards and social services, whether these are advanced on the grounds of promoting European integration, safeguarding British sovereignty or simply making British industry ‘competitive’. Workers’ struggle across national lines—not nationalist poison—must be our reply to capitalist attacks.”

The minority comrades characterized this position as “ultra-left” and “abstentionist” although it was clearly in line with the IBT’s positions on the 1992 Maastricht referendum, as well as the 1988 Canada/U.S. Free Trade Agreement.

The debate on this issue, which occupied most of the second day of the conference, revealed that comrade Cullen and his associates had come to the view that socialism is not a viable option for the foreseeable future. They therefore considered it a matter of some urgency for workers to embrace what they took to be the least oppressive variant for organizing capitalism. Perhaps it should have come as no surprise that after losing on this issue, the minority comrades would decide to walk out before what had been billed as the “main event”—the discussion on the transitional program.

Soon after his departure, comrade Cullen made his liquidationist conclusions explicit by observing that it would be “absurd” for him and his followers to attempt to launch a new organization. Discouraged by the course of political developments in the last quarter century (and particularly the past decade), they concluded that we, and those whose work we are continuing, have misread history in a rather fundamental way.

Given the depth and scope of their differences, it was inevitable that we would part ways, for these comrades had changed their minds about the fundamental validity of the project to which they were once recruited. On the whole, our oppositionists conducted themselves in a serious and politically responsible manner during their time in the IBT. While we cannot endorse their pessimistic conclusions, we appreciate the fact that by fighting for their views they helped deepen our understanding of, and commitment to, the Trotskyist tradition for which we stand.

## From the IBT to the Socialist Alliance

Another issue discussed at our conference was the future of the former IBT members in Britain who had been instrumental in the publication of the *SLP Marxist Bulletin*.

These comrades had concluded from the SLP's December 1997 national conference (see article elsewhere in this issue) that they had no reason to remain in the SLP, and were in the process of deciding on the manner of exiting and their future perspectives.

Many ostensible Trotskyists in Britain believe there is no role for a small group except as an entry inside some larger formation. It became apparent that one *MB* comrade, Ian Donovan, was uncomfortable with the developing consensus that the best means of propagating the program necessary for socialist revolution was through re-constituting a British section of the IBT.

Comrade Donovan has many talents, and, though at times erratic, he played a valuable role in helping establish the IBT in Britain. As the *Marxist Bulletin* comrades prepared to depart from the SLP, he began to express an intense desire to participate in the newly-revived Socialist Alliance. The other comrades did not share this enthusiasm, and tended to view the Socialist Alliance, in both conception and execution, as a propaganda bloc between a variety of ostensibly socialist formations "united" on the basis of a lowest-common denominator program somewhat to the right of most of its components. In short: a swamp.

In departing the IBT, comrade Donovan downplayed the issue of the Socialist Alliance. Instead, he took issue with our view that the Spartacist tendency of the 1970s represented the continuity of authentic Trotskyism. Comrade Donovan had been a member of the Spartacist League/Britain (SL/B) in the mid-1980s, after the group had undergone a qualitative degeneration, and he had been a victim of gross abuse at the hands of the SL/B leadership. During his time in the IBT, he periodically displayed a certain subjectivity toward the SL/B.

In the period leading up to his departure from the IBT, comrade Donovan began to argue that the Spartacist tendency had been wrong in citing Trotsky to support its opposition to voting for workers' parties participating in popular fronts (i.e., alliances with bourgeois parties). When Salvador Allende was elected at the head of the Chile's Unidad Popular, the SL wrote:

"It is the most elementary duty for revolutionary Marxists to irreconcilably oppose the Popular Front in the elec-



NEW YORK TIMES

11 September 1973: end of 'Chilean Road to Socialism'

tion and to place absolutely no confidence in it in power. Any 'critical support' to the Allende coalition is class treason, paving the way for a bloody defeat for the Chilean working people when domestic reaction, abetted by international imperialism, is ready."

—*Spartacist*, No. 19, November-December 1970

The remarkable prescience of this assessment is all the more impressive because the SL stood alone among all the world's supposed Trotskyist currents in refusing any political support to Allende. A quarter of a century after Pinochet delivered the "bloody defeat" predicted in *Spartacist*, comrade Donovan asserted that, because Leon Trotsky never explicitly opposed voting for workers' parties in popular-front alliances, it was possible, at least in principle, for revolutionaries to call for votes to Unidad Popular candidates.

In its 1970 statement, the SL had explained the political logic of its position:

"Within reformist workers' parties there is a profound contradiction between their proletarian base and formal ideology and the class-collaborationist aims and personal appetites of their leaderships. This is why Marxists...give reformist parties such 'critical support'—against overt agents of capital—as will tend to regroup the proletarian base around a revolutionary program."

—*Ibid.*

When the reformists enter into a common formation with the capitalist parties this contradiction is suppressed for the duration of the bloc:

"It is our job then to re-create the basis for struggle *within* such parties by demanding that they *break* with the coalition. This break must be the elementary precondition for even the most critical support."

—*Ibid.*

The Bolsheviks conducted just such a campaign against Kerensky's coalition with the bourgeoisie under the slogan "Down with the Ten Capitalist Ministers." Lenin's absolute political opposition to popular frontism in 1917 was critical to the success of the October Revolution. Conversely, where revolutionaries have been unable to mount such a

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campaign on an effective scale, the results have been uniformly disastrous—from Shanghai in 1927 to Santiago in 1973.

Comrade Donovan came to regard the SL's rejection of electoral support to all the candidates in popular fronts as evidence of hopeless sectarian abstentionism. An IBT leader who responded to Donovan suggested that there could be a subjective element involved in this reassessment:

"I understand that your experience with the degenerated SL/B was very traumatic. I suspect that this has something to do with your apparent impulse to want [to] reject the iSt as ever having been any good. As you know the IBT is based on quite a different assessment."

The IBT leadership proposed that, "as this discussion does not grow out of any question posed in our actual work" and involved a "hypothetical question of possible electoral tactics toward a possible popular-front coalition," a substantive discussion could be postponed until the next preconference period. Comrade Donovan found that to be unacceptable and promptly left the IBT to begin publication of his own journal, *Revolution & Truth*. He also joined the London unit of the Socialist Alliance, of which he was subsequently elected chair.

(Last January, nine months after leaving the IBT, Donovan assaulted a member of the Spartacist League/Britain at a demonstration commemorating the British Army's 1972 Bloody Sunday massacre in Ireland after she slandered him as a supporter of the reactionary Royal Ulster Constabulary. Our comrades on the spot immediately condemned the assault. We have a longstanding commitment to defend any leftist, including members of the Spartacist tendency, against such physical attacks.)

Comrades Cullen and Donovan left the IBT for different reasons, but they shared a common impulse to abjure the "sectarian," "ultra-left" and "abstentionist" Trotskyist tradition which they once embraced. In commenting on comrade Cullen's departure in a posting on our website, we recalled Trotsky's observation:

"Great political defeats inevitably provoke a reconsideration of values, generally occurring in two directions. On the one hand the true vanguard, enriched by the experi-

ence of defeat, defends with tooth and nail the heritage of revolutionary thought and on this basis attempts to educate new cadres for the mass struggle to come. On the other hand the routinists, centrists, and dilettantes, frightened by defeat, do their best to destroy the authority of revolutionary tradition and go backward in their search for a 'New Word.'"

—"Stalinism and Bolshevism: Concerning the Historical and Theoretical Roots of the Fourth International" (29 August 1937)

## Two, Three, Many MEGs!

Politics is a two-way street, and our 1998 "Tasks and Perspectives" document projected that:

"The rightward shift in the politics of ostensibly revolutionary groups is likely to continue to produce splits and fissures. Inevitably that process should throw up some leftward-moving elements."

A few such exceptional individuals continue to find their way to us, attracted by the consistently revolutionary program for which we struggle. An outstanding recent example was the decision of two comrades of the Marxist Education Group (MEG) of Albany, New York, to join the IBT. (See also the statement of Stephen J., formerly a member of the Canadian International Socialists elsewhere in this issue.)

In 1995 the MEG was founded by former members of the centrist Revolutionary Workers League (RWL) who had become alienated by that organization's subordination of programmatic considerations to the frenetic organizational dictates of the group's leaders. After a few years spent participating in a range of agitational activities in Albany, the MEG comrades concluded that it was necessary to widen their field of activity, and explore the possibility of regrouping with other revolutionaries.

The MEG had always regarded the struggle of the Revolutionary Tendency (RT—forerunner of the Spartacist League) in the American Socialist Workers Party of the early 1960s as a critical episode in the history of American Trotskyism. This inclined them to sympathetically consider the historical record of the Spartacist League. Yet their encounters with the Spartacist League in the 1990s as members of the RWL made them wary of the SL's claim to represent the continuity of the RT. They were not impressed by the SL's tendency to substitute hysterics, ultimatums and name-calling for serious political debate.

In early 1998 the MEG contacted both the IBT and the Internationalist Group (led by the SL's former editor Jan Norden). This led to a series of discussions, both written and verbal, with both groups focusing on the Russian question, the general strike and the history of the SL's political degeneration. Ultimately the comrades concluded that the IBT was the most consistent representative of the revolutionary programmatic heritage of the RT and early SL.

The recruitment of serious young revolutionaries moving from centrism to Trotskyism is always welcome, but it has particular significance in a period of limited opportunities. It is also important as a harbinger of potentially larger revolutionary regroupments in the future as the tide of counterrevolution ebbs, and the profound contradictions embedded in the post-Soviet New World Order begin to erupt. We look forward to that moment, when the capitalists, their agents and ideologues will be forcefully reminded that "Red Ain't Dead!" ■

(Interested readers can find related material at our website: "www.bolshevik.org")

## REVOLUTIONARY HISTORY

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